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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000169

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/24/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN FREE PRESS FACES AN EVEN MORE RESOLUTE
CHAVEZ IN 2007

REF: CARACAS 92 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Since turning the calendar to 2007, President Chavez has ratcheted up his vitriol - and promised concrete actions - against opposition media outlets, including but not limited to RCTV (reftel). He is also focusing his attention on his own house, dictating not just what, but also when and where even his closest advisors can speak to the press. Beyond the borders of Venezuela, either through multinational blocs such as Mercosur or his pet media outlet Telesur, Chavez is aggressively promoting his own brand of "media hegemony." END SUMMARY.

CHAVEZ MUZZLES HIS TROOPS

12. (U) Through a document entitled "Communications Strategy Plan 2007," President Chavez ordered the elimination of departments of Press and Publicity in all of the 27 ministries that make up his new Cabinet, as well as the elimination of the Press Office of the Executive Vice Presidency. The Plan requires that all Cabinet ministries remain in constant consultation with and coordinate all press statements or releases through the Ministry of Communication and Information. Information Minister Willian Lara met January 11 and 12 with the directors of Information, Press, and Institutional Relations of each of the 27 ministries to deliver the 2007 Plan. The Plan also requires the newly sworn-in ministers to make official statements to the press only in the Caracas headquarters of their respective ministries or from Miraflores.

13. (U) The muzzle on official statements to the press filters down beyond the ministerial level. The Ministry of Interior and Justice on January 17 prohibited police officials from making any statements to the press. Even a seemingly positive press conference, in which the Miranda Police Institute intended to announce details of a security plan for schools, hospitals, and other health centers had to be scrapped under the new guidance. Because local police authorities often brief the press on criminal incidents, it is unclear how this new diktat will affect reporting on common crime.

¶4. (U) On January 8, the new Telecommunications Ministry, under the leadership of former Justice Minister Jesse Chacon, was officially created. Its organizational structure and functions were published in the Federal Registry. Two of the functions of the new Cabinet ministry, as defined in legislation, indicate the dominance the government seeks to exert on all press - both public and private: first, "to regulate and evaluate the policies and alignments of the State in the promotion and development of the telecommunications sector, information technology, and mail services"; and second, "to grant, renew, revoke, and suspend administrative capabilities and licenses for private and public audio radiodifusion and open television." This, it would appear, constitutes an early definition of "media hegemony" (see below).

¶5. (U) Under the guise of labeling all government ministries as "popular powers," the new ministry will push community initiatives to promote Latin American and Caribbean integration and regulate "the interchange of information by electronic media, technological development of communications security and electronic commerce." The latter purports to give legal protections to personal data transmitted electronically; cynics may argue it gives the government greater access to such personal information. This concern is also raised by the BRV's stated intention to nationalize CANTV, which is the single largest Internet service provider in Venezuela and controls approximately three quarters of the country's broadband access.

NCTV - CHAVEZ VS. SINGING CHILDREN

¶6. (U) On January 17, the BRV National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) effectively withdrew over-the-air transmission licenses of approximately a half-dozen regional

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television stations. The ruling essentially declared the frequencies operated by these channels to be free and available for use. The affected channels comprise the Zulia-based, Catholic Church-affiliated network Ninos Cantores (Singing Children) Television (NCTV). Venezuelan Episcopal Conference (CEV) First Vice President Roberto Luckert initially characterized the government's decision as "tying the channel's hands and totally subordinating it to the designs of the government." The Archdiocese of Maracaibo's appeals to the Supreme Court were initially refused, with the Court saying that neither the Church nor the network had the proper authorization to disseminate transmissions using the signals in question.

¶7. (U) Much like RCTV, NCTV and its senior executives argued that NCTV did hold the proper authorizations to transmit and ownership of the signal. NCTV's legal director, Gustavo Ruiz, produced documentation to this effect between NCTV and recent CONATEL directors. Refuting a Bolivarian rumor, Ruiz insisted that NCTV has consistently complied with the taxation requirements imposed on all media outlets by the various telecommunications laws.

¶8. (U) The network's affiliation with the Catholic church may have helped it keep its case alive. Maracaibo Archbishop and CEV President Monsignor Ubaldo Santana met with newly-appointed Telecommunication Minister Jesse Chacon January 19, where an agreement was reached allowing the network to continue broadcasting. Santana's and Chacon's meeting led to an understanding under which the NCTV network could continue operating in Zulia and Carabobo states; however, the remaining frequencies under Church control but currently out of use would be returned to state control.

BEYOND BRV BORDERS

¶9. (U) One week prior to the January 18-19 Mercosur Heads of State summit in Rio de Janeiro, state media representatives from the member countries held a three-day conference in Argentina to establish a common platform to present to the bloc. Mercosur's Specialized Social Communication Conference organized the meeting for each member to understand the others' communication policies and practices, and to explore the idea of working together. An Argentine representative said the goal would be "to preserve our identities and at the same time construct in our countries" a Mercosur-based solidarity. For the BRV's part, Vice Minister of Strategy and Communication Amelia Bustillo Ponce advocated a "modern communications platform," lamenting that in Venezuela there lacks "equilibrium" between public and private media.

¶10. (U) Controversial British member of Parliament George Galloway made waves all the way across the Atlantic when he announced in mid-January he would seek Venezuelan support to launch an Internet-based television station. Galloway, who was expelled from the Labor Party in 2003, wishes to fill the station with political satire and speeches by President Chavez (no shortage of airtime, there). Galloway proposed to travel to Venezuela in February in search of financial and technical support from the BRV. Galloway indicated that his proposal lacked infrastructure but, if necessary, he could transmit from his own home.

¶11. (U) Andres Izarra, president of Venezuela-based "Pan-Latin American" network Telesur, announced January 20 plans to begin transmissions in Europe prior to May. Telesur intends to open its first European affiliates in Madrid and London. Telesur's expansionism is part of its initiative to be "an alternative to the media that comes from the North and that at times does not reflect the truth." The European presence would also allow the rest of the world to see today's Latin America, says Izarra. Izarra is a former Communications minister and said in a January 8 interview appearing in major daily "El Nacional" that Venezuela required a "media hegemony" that would support an "ideological and cultural battle" to propel socialism. He has also commented that there is no country in the world that can boast greater freedom of expression than in Venezuela.

COMMENT

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¶12. (C) The controversy surrounding the impending closure of RCTV remains the dominant free press issue in Venezuela, but Chavez's increasingly authoritarian stance towards the media is evident in a number of contexts. The situation with NCTV is part of the government-orchestrated strategy to attack licenses with questionable legal arguments. While the Catholic church is still a hard target, the government nonetheless fired a shot across its bow.

¶13. (C) The latest restrictive policies with regard to official statements to the press vest considerable power in Information and Communications Minister Willian Lara and centralize the flow of BRV information as never before. Chavez is now making clear he wants to hear no voice other than his own, not even from his own hand-picked minions. The practical result will be to silence most of the government ministries and leave President Chavez not just as the uberspokesman for the entire government, but perhaps its only spokesman.

BROWNFIELD